

FEMINIST APPROACH OF PEARL S BUCK: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ‘THE GOOD EARTH’

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ABSTRACT

Feminism refers to movements aimed at defending and establishing equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women in a male centric world. Right from Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft, from Simone de Beauvoir to Jane Austen and beyond, women have been demanding their rights in a male centric world. Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, the Nobel Laureate, contributed a great deal to the rapid expansion of feminism in America as well as China. Pearl Buck was able to shape American perceptions of China more effectively and positively than other feminists, and other missionaries. She tries to bring out the pathetic condition of women in ‘The Good Earth’ especially through the character of O-lan. The present paper aims at depicting the status of women in patriarchal Chinese society and social conditions responsible for it. This was fulfilled by critical and analytical study of Buck’s renowned novel ‘The Good Earth’.

KEYWORDS: Confucian Culture, Social Constructionist Theory, Feminism, Foot, Binding

INTRODUCTION

“In childhood, a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s and when her husband is dead under her sons, she should have no independence.” (The Law of Manu)

Essentially Feminism is the belief and advocacy of equal rights for women. Feminism is a philosophy which promotes the appreciation of women and their contributions (Henry, 2010). It is based on social, political and economical equality for women. Feminism can also be viewed as a movement or a revolution that yearns for an equal world without limitations (Henry 2010). Brizee and Tompkins (2010) asserted that culture, not biology, determines one’s gender. This notion also implies that culture establishes masculinity and femininity. One of the first writer to take such a stance was the English woman, Mary Wollstonecraft. Her treatise ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Women’ (1792) outlined the complaints and paths for social equality that has been followed around the world. Femininity is constructed by social and cultural forces. Feminist Simone De Beauvoir (1989, p. 267) said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine.”

First wave Feminism came to the United States in the late 1800s Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony tirelessly worked for suffrage. In 1950 to 1980’s, Second wave Feminism worked towards Cultural integration and was led by activities such as Betty Friedan in America and Simone de Beauvoir in France. The third wave Feminism began in 1980 and addresses feminism across class and race lines, as being grounded in culture rather than biology. Women were portrayed in novel after novel as submissive housewives, mothers or as sex symbols by Feminist writers like Louisa May

Aloctt, Willa Cather, Kate Chopins, Emily Dickinson, Ellen Glasgow, Sylvia Plath, Hilda Doolittle, Pearl S. Buck taking themes of social reform, slavery, abolition, women's rights, racial genocide etc.

Pearl S. Buck, a champion of women's emancipation also belongs to the tradition of women writers such as Stowe and Pinkole - one of the most popular American Novelists of her day, humanitarian, crusader for women's rights, philanthropist, noted for her novels of life in China. She also tried other literary forms like novel, drama, short story, etc. She wrote 53 books. In 1936, she was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. She also got the honor of becoming the 3rd American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature following Sinclair Lewis and Eugene O' Neill.

This paper aims at exploring the position of women in traditional Chinese culture, focusing on the suffering and limitations faced by women from ill-treatment in childhood to servitude in adulthood, particularly through the character of O -Lan and other women characters in Buck's novel 'The Good Earth'.

Research Methods Used: Descriptive, Analytical and Critical

CRITICAL STUDY OF 'THE GOOD EARTH'

According to Pam (2003, p. 121), Buck's personal experiences in China enabled her to depict a world in which women are property. Women are strictly confined in the severely rigid patriarchal society of the early twentieth-century China. By reading 'The Good Earth' we can sum up that the Chinese society is patriarchal, oppressive to women through the trials and tribulations, women like O-Lan faces. In the 1st chapter, her parents sell O-Lan to the great House of Hwang. In China, Poor families would often sell their daughters off for slavery or prostitutions. When her owner, the Old Mistress explains O-Lan's appearance to Wang, she claims, "She is not beautiful, but that you do not need." The Old Mistress reinstates what his father tells her before their marital relationship begins:

"And what will we do with a pretty woman? We must have a woman who will tend the house and bear Children as she works in the fields. A pretty woman will be forever thinking about clothes to go with her pretty face."

Femininity is not bred into one's genes. Instead, it is created by members of a society. Females are typically encouraged to behave in specific feminine ways from a young age (The Social Construction, 2007). For instance, girls are discouraged from acting roughly for society grimace upon such displays of unfeminine traits. Girls are also provided with toys that strengthen these "rules" of "femininity" (The Social Construction, 2007). For example, girls are given dolls and kitchen sets to play with. They are expected to become mothers and manage household chores.

After all, men's dominancy over women is the central ideology in a traditional Chinese society (Huo, 2001). He believes that men must not yield to women. When O-lan, Wang Lung's bride, reaches their home, Wang Lung's father intentionally ignores her. He pretends to take interest in the clouds and made remarks on the weather (Buck, 1966, p. 29). It would have been beneath him to notice her. His ignorance of O-lan demonstrates his disregard of women. To him, she is merely a person to be used for the household tasks. He believes that women are meant to be used as slaves. He is portrayed as impatient for his evening meal—"I'm too old to wait for my food like this" (Buck, 1966, p. 36). He says this to O-lan when she returns home from the fields with Wang Lung. He refuses to prepare his own meals since she is now staying with them. His attitude shows that he holds women responsible for all domestic chores. In his perception, women must also be submissive and satisfied with what their husband provides them with.

This notion can be seen in the scene where he condemns pretty women who are materialistic, saying "She will be forever thinking about clothes to go with her face" (Buck, 1966, p. 20). As a matter of fact, Wang Lung's manly mannerisms are not innate but they are certainly constructed by his father. His father's masculinity, on the other hand, would have been inherited by his own father, Wang Lung's grandfather. This process reflects Berger and Luckmann's (1966, p. 45) assumption of the social construction of reality— As a result of it, the new generation will not raise any question against the strength of such masculine traits and will accept of them as norms or traditions.

The births of a baby Boy are of a higher value in a patriarchal Confucian system. Wang Lung also had such notion that sons are more valuable than daughters. Female Infanticide was also traced in Chinese society. Wang Lung is suddenly smitten with fear when he expects to have a son. He then hides his child with his coat and cries out,

"What a pity our child is a female whom no one could want and covered with smallpox as well!
Let us pray it may die" (Buck, 1966, p. 50).

His eagerness for a son is evident when O-lan gives birth to his child. He asks her annoyingly, "Is it a man? Tell me at least this—is it a man" (Buck, 1966, p. 40). When he learns that the child is a boy, he plans to buy a basketful of red eggs for the people in his village, saying "Thus will everyone know I have a son" (Buck, 1966, p. 41). By presenting a baby boy instead of a girl, she is praised and treated with respect by the people of the Great House, hence allowing her to feel a sense of pride. If she were to have brought back a girl, she would have been sent back to her parents' home. The birth of his son boosts Wang Lung's masculine pride for a son is significant. After all, sons are responsible for bearing the family name and maintaining family traditions (Lee, 1953, p. 276).

O-lan spends her life working for an endeavor for which she never seeks a reward. She gives all her efforts and applies all her considerable capability to improve Wang Lung's position and she neither receives loyalty for passion from him in return. Wang Lung is annoyed when she becomes pregnant with her second child fearing that her condition will keep her away from working in the field:

"..... and when Wang Lung perceived one day that again she was with child, his first thought was of irritation that during harvest she would be unable to work. He shouted at her with fatigue, 'so you have chosen this time to breed again, have you!'

Women resort to the terrible practice of female infanticide. O-lan gives birth to a daughter, whom she instantly smothers. Wang Lung wraps the body in a piece of broken mat and lay sit next to an old grave: "He had scarcely put the burden down before a famished, wolfish dog hovered almost at once behind him." Due to the threat of starvation, O-lan did not hesitate to kill her own female child. Female infanticide was a common practice in Chinese society. O-lan's act shows that there was a social precedent of killing female infants.

Foot-binding is a "feminine mystique" designed to please men (Blake, 1994, p. 676). According to the social constructionist theory, social phenomena are formed, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by humans (List of Sociological Theories, 2010). Likewise, the significance of foot-binding was communally agreed upon and made into a tradition in feudal China. Wang Lung's masculine admiration of bound feet is shaped by members of the Confucian culture. They consider bound feet beautiful. Therefore, Wang Lung too deems it a sign of beauty. His craving for O-lan to have bound feet is apparent when he said —"He saw with an instant's disappointment that her feet were not bound" (Buck, 1996, p. 26). Wang Lung's craving for this old Chinese tradition of beauty demonstrates that how much influence

society has on building his masculine traits. The Confucian culture of China is responsible for such Wang Lung's masculine view point of sons, concubines and foot-binding. Other than that, culture can have influence on one's femininity as well.

Buck has depicted the social conditions facing poor Chinese family realistically. O-lan prefers the option of selling her daughter. If she were to remain with the family, all of them might starve. If she is sold to a wealthy family, she will be provided with food and shelter and her sale will give the family money to survive.

CONCLUSIONS

It delineates the trials and tribulations women in Chinese society were facing which can be visible through the character of O-lan in 'The Good Earth'. The significance of the study is that one can know about the patriarchal Chinese society and social evils prevalent like selling of daughters, female infanticide, Foot binding, domestic violence, women as sex symbols etc. It also can be used for how societies organize gender roles, relations, and identities, and how these intersect with other hierarchies of power, such as class, race, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and age. Women's and Gender Studies provide critical thinking skills and an understanding of women's diverse contributions to society, which are valuable for a wide variety of careers. Women's and Gender Studies are committed to realizing the equality of women and men in all areas of life so that our relationships, both personal and social, are characterized by the freedom and mutuality which can only occur among equals. The study might be useful for the sociologist to study social conditions and cultural study and even for cross cultural study of different countries.

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